

God and Empire

John Dear | Sep. 4, 2007 | On the Road to Peace

John Dominic Crossan, New Testament scholar and bestselling author, has just published an illuminating book about the nonviolence of Jesus, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (Harper San Francisco, New York, 2007).

In it he outlines an important point or two. First is the notion that the Christian Bible strives mightily to paint a radical portrait of a just and nonviolent God. Such a portrait, he says, counters our ancient suppositions. Namely, our taking for granted civilization's claim to violence and injustice. Civilization claims violence as its due -- a prerogative, it assumes, sanctioned under heaven's approving eye. Our minds are transfixed, and we go along; we abdicate to the state. We regard violence as natural, customary, the exclusive privilege of those in power.

But here and there the Bible imparts a different view -- God sanctions no violence. Trouble is, the view comes down to us murky, adulterated, partly hidden in the shadows. Why aren't things clearly stated? Because the world impinges and muddles matters, even among the hallowed pages of scripture, for the civilized have always lived amid armies and dungeons, pogroms and coups. In such a world, the rigors of nonviolence weigh heavily. And humanity struggles and fails -- even to some extent the composers of Scripture. The struggle over nonviolence even goes on within the Bible's own pages.

From Genesis to Revelation, we have two Gods, as it were. A God on one hand who loves God's enemies, who on the just and the unjust sends abundant rain. And a vengeful God on the other hand, all sulfur and fire. A great incompatibility. The Bible thrashes about in its own travail. Says Crossan, "Again and again we manage to mute [God's vision of nonviolence] back into the normalcy of violent injustice." And the reader of the Bible wonders: Which God is humanity up against? Which vision are we to seize hold of?

The vision we seize, says Crossan, must be the one incarnated by the historical Jesus. And Jesus was nonviolent. On this matter both Crossan and I insist. "It is not the violent but the nonviolent God who is revealed to Christian faith in Jesus of Nazareth and announced to Christian faith by Paul of Tarsus."

Here is a startling revelation of God in Jesus -- almost too good to be true. God is nonviolent. God worked through Jesus and his followers to subvert, nonviolently, the empire of Rome. And the young Christian communities took up the challenge. They were bands that emulated as best they could Jesus' nonviolent resistance against the Roman Empire.

Pursuing the matter, Crossan poses the issue. "Since the Old Roman Empire crucified our Lord Jesus Christ, how can we be his faithful followers in America as the New Roman Empire?" The inference follows naturally -- the vocation of American Christians is to emulate similar resistance against our empire at home.

Crossan poses a few questions more, and the heart trembles to read them. "Is our Christian Bible violent or nonviolent? ? Is Bible-fed Christian violence ? instigating our imperial violence as the New Roman Empire?" And among the final pages are others yet: "How is it possible to be a nonviolent Christian within a violent Christianity based on a violent Christian Bible? How is it possible to be a faithful Christian in an American empire facilitated by a violent Christian Bible?"

If we take such questions to heart, they fling us into the gravity and tensions of history. They place us, as Crossan says, where God's radical nonviolence challenges the habitual violence of civilization and where civilization's violence challenges the nonviolence of God.

Such is the place Jesus himself occupied before the Roman procurator Pilate. Here was the emissary of the nonviolent God facing off with a functionary of empire -- an empire, need it be added, that employed violence as a matter of course. Jesus said, "My kingdom does not belong to *this world*. If my kingdom did belong to *this world*, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the [Judeans]. But as it is, my kingdom is not here." (John 18:36)

"This world," says Crossan, means something far more specific than the third planet from the sun. It expresses the customary way of the world; it means "empire and the barbarism of civilization." And so the tenor of Jesus' testimony, according to Crossan, was this: "Your soldiers hold me, Pilate, but my companions will not attack you even to save me from death. Your Roman empire, Pilate, is based on the injustice of violence, but my divine kingdom is based on the justice of nonviolence."

Between the two kingdoms stands but one difference. Not that one kingdom is here and the other among the stars. Not that one is now and the other beyond time. Or that one is secular and the other religious -- an unheard of distinction in those days. "The crucial difference," Crossan says, "-- and the only one mentioned -- is Jesus' nonviolence and Pilate's violence."

With his standoff with Pilate, Jesus entered a crucible of his own making. Just days earlier he had outsmarted his opponents, turned their puzzles and conundrums back on their heads. ("Shall we stone the adulteress according to the Law?" they asked. "Let the one without sin be the first," he answered.) But there is no such attempt with Pilate. No appeal for reform. No effort at all to finesse his way toward another day. Here was history's quintessential clash and Jesus would take it to its natural finale.

"Jesus," Crossan says, "could have told Pilate that Rome's rule was unjust and God's rule was just. That would have been true, but it would have avoided the issue of whether God's just rule was to be established by human or divine violence." Which is to say, it fell to Jesus not to convince with argument or move with feeling. It fell to him to *embody* the problem, to *exemplify* it, so to say, in the stream of history. "Beneath the problem of empire," Crossan says, "is the problem of justice, but beneath the problem of justice is the problem of violence." Jesus held the problem close to his body.

And so today, on the shoulders of American Christians, is laid a crucible of our own. We must make a choice, Crossan says. Do we choose a God of violence, rooted in the course of human events? Or choose the God of nonviolence incarnate in Jesus?

It matters how we choose. Choose one way, and the die has been cast for the way of the world, a fable, an oxymoron -- a jagged peace nailed together through violence. Choosing the other, leads to discipleship and union and the ordained way of God -- organic peace thriving through justice.

Officialdom today has peace much on their lips -- a full blown *Pax Americana*. The media rhapsodizes in terms of sole superpower and new empire. Officials seize on the ancient notion of divine right. American destructive power tightens throats with pride. And in the confusion Christian communities fall into being co-opted and into irrelevance. Our irrelevance in turn saddles us with the enormous questions Crossan dares to ask. As followers of the nonviolent Jesus, what to do? As those who live in the belly of the new empire, how to respond?

Reading Crossan leads me to a few answers. Shortly put, our vocation is to non-cooperate with the American empire. Ours is to refuse to be imperial people. And the forms of our refusal are for each of us to find. Declining to join the military. Withholding our taxes for war. Practicing downward mobility. Serving those on the margins. Caring for the beleaguered earth.

Second, we must fix our minds on Jesus as our Lord and Savior, as the Apostle Paul so often stressed. Thereby we place our citizenship in the kingdom of God and declare ourselves Jesus' attendants, not Bush's and Cheney's. We quit ourselves of being minions of empire.

And third, I submit, we embrace nonviolence. We spread the "heresy" of nonviolence. And as it gallops from heart to heart, when the empire finally falls, it falls nonviolently because of us. And if nonviolently, then not a dreadful upheaval of malice and blood, but a gentle transformation of relief and joy.

"There is," Crossan concludes, "both good news and bad news."

The bad news is that our problem is as deep as human civilization itself. ? The good news, as seen from Jesus and Paul, is that the violent normalcy of human civilization is not the inevitable destiny of human nature. Christian faith and human evolution agree on that point. Since we invented civilization some six thousand years ago along the irrigated floodplains of great rivers, we can also un-invent it -- we can create its alternative. In the challenge of Christian faith, we are called to cooperate in establishing the Kingdom of God in a transformed earth. In the challenge of human evolution, we are called to Post-Civilization, to imagine it, to create it, and to enjoy it on a transfigured earth.

John Dear will stand trial on Sept. 6 in Albuquerque, N.M., Federal Court for trying to visit the office of Sen. Pete Domenici a year ago. He and his group,

www.declarationofpeace.org [1], were stopped before they even got to the elevator. For info, see:

www.johndear.org [2].

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